

EDITORIAL

Energy, Again (and Again and Again and . . .)

John H. Perkins

As this journal went to press for the March issue, we were optimistic about the new administration in Washington. The Clinton/Gore team had taken a leadership role in discussing the case for reduction in fossil fuel consumption. Nevertheless it was unclear that they could move the case beyond the already committed. We argued that the Bush/Cheney duo was in a position to bring along enough of the unconvinced to forge new directions in American energy policy.

Now, lamentably, it seems like new directions are nowhere in sight. In fact, a cursory examination of the address by US Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, on 19 March 2001,¹ conveys a vivid picture that the new administration is giving overwhelming emphasis to two, and only two, considerations: (1) consumption of energy is rising; and (2) supplies must therefore also rise to meet the demand.

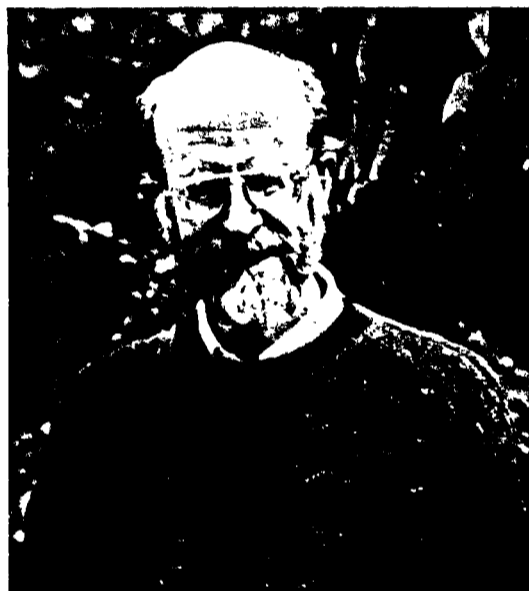
Abraham's audience, the National Energy Summit sponsored by the US Chamber of Commerce, may have been comfortable with his message, or perhaps not. The point is that the address provides nothing in the way of imaginative new thinking about how US policy could deal with energy problems.

What might a business-oriented audience find provocative, challenging, and yet within a comprehensible framework? Well, let's start with the obvious: If you notice consumption of something in short supply is going up, then wouldn't you want to analyze why?

Secretary Abraham notes only one specific about where all this new energy consump-

tion is going: "... the demands of the Internet already consume some 8–13 percent of electricity [in the United States]." Is this the only new technology or situation that has caused increased consumption? Where is the rest of it going? No clue in the Secretary's address. Consumption is just going up, almost by magic one might imagine.

A second omission, one that could have resonated well with the US Chamber folks, was a serious engagement with conservation. I know personally from walking around my place of work, my home, and my city that America has options for conservation that we have not yet embraced.



Good business people know that you need to corral a production cost going out of control. If the government of the United States is something like our country's board of directors, why isn't the board helping the staff (all us citizens) see the central importance of conservation? Although this issue is bipartisan, we think Republicans should understand this matter as well or better than any others.

And where is the environment in the Secretary's speech? Well, he identifies more environmentally benign methods of oil and gas exploration. He also refers to the

concept that some methods of burning coal are cleaner than others.

Is this an adequate presentation of energy and the environment? What about the fact that some reputable scientists have identified global climate change, forced substantially by burning of fossil fuels, as an issue that demands serious attention from the highest levels of government? That the debate over CO₂, climate change, and the Kyoto protocol is not even mentioned is simply breathtaking. We would have been happier if these subjects had been held up for refutation and dismissal than ignored. At least that would have acknowledged the *existence* of something that just might matter.

If we follow on our earlier analogy of the government as a board of directors, wouldn't people raise eyebrows if the board steadfastly tried to ignore a matter that many citizens felt was of life-threatening seriousness?

What about the development of alternatives to fossil fuels in the Secretary's world? Well, he does mention nuclear and hydro power, and the briefest coverage possible is afforded solar and wind alternatives. But is there any sense of urgency? Or a sense that maybe government might want to consider fostering development of alternatives? No, according to Secretary Abraham, and government should really let market forces determine what gets developed. Given that it is still very cheap to produce fossil fuels, and that they have their own hidden subsidies, a tilt towards so-called "free markets" virtually guarantees that alternatives are off the agenda for the immediate future.

Our sense of optimism about the leadership that might have been provided by the new administration is diminished. Moreover, our optimism is reduced even though we can see a multitude of issues that could appeal to or be considered seriously by the business interests in the US Chamber of Commerce.

We acknowledge that the Secretary raises some valid points on the aging energy infrastructure, the difficulties of siting new plants, and the need for multiple energy sources. Unfortunately what is left out roars far louder than the few good points included. What a waste of an opportunity for leadership for America and the entire world.

There are better ways to run a business. We have a sense that the editorial pages of this journal may be revisiting these matters on a regular basis. After all, essentially every problem worked on by environmental professionals has deep and enduring roots in the energy economy.

Note

1. Secretary Abraham's speech can be viewed online: http://www.energy.gov/HQDocs/speeches/2001/marss/energy_speech.html.

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